

## The Surprise Party by Pat Marlowe

My father died of a broken neck on the evening of his fiftieth birthday, having fallen down a long flight of stairs in the dark. Naturally, when one of the wealthiest men in England dies suddenly and violently in his own home, rumours start to float around and investigations have to take place. My brother Paul and I, as the chief beneficiaries of his will, inevitably fell under suspicion, especially as we were in the house at the time. There was, however, no evidence of foul play and as about two hundred birthday guests swore blind that at the very moment the old man was coming a cropper on the stairs we were in the ballroom with them, the police were forced to admit that it was a tragic accident.

The inquest jury returned a verdict of accidental death, the newspapers mourned the passing of a “Titan of Business who had helped put the ‘Great’ back into Great Britain”, and my brother and I became very rich indeed.

I realise that the death of an industrialist ceases to be of any interest to anyone other than his immediate family, the day after he dies. Nonetheless, it might be of interest to some to learn what really happened on my father’s fiftieth birthday.

At the time these events took place, my father was on to his fifth wife, who was very pretty, and several years younger than me. He had dispensed with our mother, wife number three, when I was six and Paul was five. He had packed us off to prep school as soon as we were old enough, and at the end of one summer term, we returned home to find that our mother had gone, and had been replaced by wife number four.

At this time, he moved the family to a huge and unpleasant country mansion. As a young man he had inherited a small fortune, which he had ruthlessly exploited

and turned into a vast fortune. It was his opinion that a man of his wealth and stature ought to be a country gentleman, and therefore set about looking for something suitable. The building he chose was enormous, drab and ugly. It was set at the bottom of a wooded hollow, in a remote part of Wiltshire. It received little in the way of sun at any time of the day, and was dark as the grave at night. It was entirely typical of my father, that even though he could have afforded to buy Buckingham Palace, he bought a hideous gothic monstrosity because, as he said, "it was going for a song."

The earliest part of the building dated from the eleventh century, and every subsequent owner had added a wing or a tower, or some 'improvement,' until, by the time we moved in, it was a crazy collection of mismatched annexes, all gloomy passageways and inter-connecting doors. On our first night there, Paul took a wrong turning on his way back to his bed-chamber, and was discovered the following morning sobbing and shivering in the chapel. Thankfully, we spent most of our childhood away at school.

When we were old enough to leave school, my father informed us that he had not devoted his life to the generation of wealth only to have it frittered away by us; consequently, if we were anticipating an allowance, we would be disappointed. He expected us to make our own way, stand on our own two feet, school of hard knocks, all that rubbish. I told him that the best get rich quick scheme in the world was to start off rich, as he had done, but he would have none of it.

I think he wanted to go the whole landed gentry hog and send me into the army and my brother into the church. Paul, not being bright enough even to be a clergyman, went off to work in television. And me? I became a writer of obscure novels which were highly regarded by the one or two people who read them, but

ignored by everyone else. I was therefore permanently stony-broke. I knew that eventually the old man would either relent or die, but he showed no sign of doing either quickly, which meant that the son and heir of one of the richest men in the country struggled each month to find the rent for a dirty room in East London.

Which is why I decided to organize a surprise party for his fiftieth birthday. I told Paul of my plan, and insisted that he would have to do all the organising as I was at a crucial stage of my current novel and couldn't spare the time. He agreed. I've always been able to convince him to do whatever I've wanted. It's what little brothers are for.

"No expense must be spared," I told him, "nothing is too lavish or expensive for our father on such an auspicious day."

Paul looked at me with a furrowed brow.

"Who's going to pay for all this?" he said. "I mean, you're permanently potless, and telly doesn't pay as well as you seem to think. Anyway, you still owe me twenty quid."

"Paul," I said, "you worry too much. By the time the bills come in, we'll be in clover."

I think he thought I meant that our father would be so moved by the trouble we'd gone to that he'd start paying us an allowance. I was happy for him to think that.

Our father had recently traded in wife number four for wife number five, and together we informed her of the plan. She was far too lazy and stupid to have organized anything on her own, and was delighted to have the job taken out of her hands.

Given his limited intelligence, Paul did a wonderful job. My father didn't have

any friends, but he did have a huge network of sycophants and hangers-on, and my brother managed to get hold of all of them, and they were all overjoyed to be considered part of my father's inner circle. A well-known dance-band was booked, and the services of one of the classier London chefs, not to mention legions of waiters, sommeliers, drivers to fetch and carry the guests, and enough alcohol to float both the Titanic and the iceberg. My father had celebrated his recent nuptials by tacking a gaudy ballroom onto the back of the house, and this was selected as the venue for the festivities.

In the week approaching the birthday, we engineered his absence from the house, while an army of designers crawled all over the ballroom, trying to make it look a little less vulgar. Paul had persuaded several of my father's business acquaintances to arrange a series of meetings for that week, which kept him in London for the duration. On his birthday itself, Paul and I invited him to a modest celebratory lunch in town, before sending him back to Wiltshire to spend a quiet night in with his new young wife.

I'm always astonished that people are taken in by surprise parties, but he was, completely. He'd tried to organize a big do himself, only to find that everyone claimed to have prior engagements which simply couldn't be re-arranged. He felt aggrieved and hard-done by, and his disposition, never sunny at the best of times, was positively thunderous by the time he arrived at the second-rate budget bistro which we had chosen.

It was the sort of place frequented by those who imagine themselves to be artistic, where the godawfulness of the food was overlooked because it had 'bags of atmosphere'. My father hated it on sight, and demanded to know why we had dragged him to such a slum on his birthday. We explained that we simply lacked the

wherewithal to entertain him in the style to which he was accustomed, but that we hoped that he would accept our lunch in the spirit in which it was offered. The words ‘feckless’ and irresponsible’ came up a lot in the ensuing hour. In order to give us a couple of hours head start to Wiltshire, we had bribed his driver to pretend that the car wouldn’t start and we left him on the pavement outside the bistro doing a whole King Lear in the storm number. Fortunately, it was a part of London where men shouting in the street doesn’t attract much attention.

We arrived in Wiltshire in good time. It was the end of January, and so night began to fall at around four-ish. All the guests were in place in the ballroom by six, and my father was expected by seven. In the intervening hour the guests made free with the cocktails and by the time the call came to let us know that the car had turned into the drive, it was the devil’s own job to keep them quiet.

The car scrunched along the gravel drive. It was a very dark night. My father climbed out of the car, and his driver instantly sped away. He groped his way towards the front door and pushed it open. Where the hell was the butler? Or his wife, for that matter? And why was the house in pitch darkness? There must be a light-switch somewhere. He felt his way along the wall and eventually found one. He flicked the switch. Nothing. Of course: a birthday power-cut.

He called out to his butler and his wife, but his voice echoed eerily down the passageways and died away unheard. Now he was getting angry. He shouted out once more, and once more there was no reply. He could not see a thing, he was tired and hungry and he was damned if he was going to stand in the hallway in the dark all night. He suddenly remembered that he had a cigarette lighter in his pocket. He took it out and sparked up a flame. Grotesque shapes juddered towards him out of the gloom, until the flame settled, and he could see ahead of him the grand staircase

which swept away from him in a majestic curve up to the gallery. The circle of light thrown out by the guttering flame was tiny, and there were many costly items of furniture and ornamentation to fall over before he reached the foot of the stairs, so he advanced cautiously. All was quiet except for the ticking of a very loud clock. He had never noticed how loud that clock was. By now he was at the stairs, and slowly began to ascend. The cigarette lighter was too hot to touch, and he flicked it out, and stood halfway up in the darkness. He called again for help and again none came. Feeling his way with his feet, he advanced blindly to the top of the staircase.

In the ballroom, the guests waited expectantly in the dark. Every so often somebody giggled, and was greeted by a volley of muffled shshshing, followed by more giggling.

Still at the top of the staircase everything was silent once more, everything except for the rhythmic tick tock tick of the clock. Tick tock tick, in and out, just like breathing, only he wasn't, he was holding his breath, yet he could hear breathing, in and out, and with a thrill of terror he realized that someone, or something, was standing on the step beside him.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "Say something, damn you." He fumbled with his cigarette lighter. Just as the flame sprang to life, something struck his hand heavily, sending the lighter flying. He heard it bounce down the stairs and skid away into the darkness across the flagstoned floor.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "Why are you doing this?"

Suddenly, he felt hands on his shoulders. And down he went, crashing and bouncing down the stairs until he landed on the flagstoned floor.

In the ballroom, the guests still waited expectantly in the dark. Eventually, after much muted joking about the old man having got lost in his own home, the lights

were switched on again, and I sent out a search party. Naturally, the police were called, and there was unpleasantness, and nobody was permitted to leave the building and all that. Paul came in for a lot of questioning, as all of the guests agreed that he'd organized the whole shindig but the fact was that he'd been in the ballroom when the lights went out, and he was in it when they came back on again, and nobody could prove that he'd left it when the lights went out, and much the same went for me.

The verdict was one of accidental death, and when the bills came in, we were, as I had predicted, in clover.

A certain coolness has arisen since between Paul and me. He has never said anything, but I think he suspects me. I hope he doesn't say anything. I should hate to have to organize a surprise party for him too.